

KUL2021 - Online Special

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Contribution to round table discussion on distance learning and digital examination

Focus student - a method to stay in contact while lecturing to black boxes

Keywords:

student contact, online lecturing, nonverbal communication

Summary:

I have successfully used a method I call “focus student” where I ask for a volunteer among students to keep their video on during an online lecture.

The problem:

When most or all students choose to attend online lectures with their own video turned off, a number of negative consequences can be noted, including:

- difficulty for the teacher to read facial reactions and see whether explanations are sufficient
- difficulty for the teacher to teach enthusiastically without seeing any students

The solution:

Explain to the student group how important it is to maintain contact, so that teaching can be both inspiring (for students and teachers alike) and adjusted to a suitable level.

Among other things (like encouraging questions and regularly checking understanding), do this:

- Ask for a volunteer student to be your “focus student” and keep their video on.
- Give plenty of appreciation for this volunteer, and promise to switch volunteers after break.
- Pin the video, in Zoom, of your focus student.
- Watch your focus student’s reactions while lecturing, and adapt your pace as you normally would do if you could be with your class in person.

Focus student – a method to stay in contact while lecturing to black boxes

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KUL 2021

What's the situation?

- Online lectures with student video off (usually)
- "Black boxes" with student names (usually)

What's the problem?

- Teacher loses contact
 - Can't read facial expressions
 - Can't see if explanations are sufficient
 - Can't teach enthusiastically
- Students lose contact
 - Can't see peer learners
 - Can't always avoid distractions
 - Can't receive optimal teaching

Whose problem?

- The students' problem:
 - Suboptimal learning
- The teachers' problem:
 - Suboptimal teaching
- Everyone's problem:
 - Suboptimal social interaction
 - No fun!

The solution – focus student

- Explain how teaching to black boxes impacts students.
- Ask for a volunteer “focus student” with video on.
 - Give plenty of appreciation to volunteer.
 - Promise to switch volunteers after break.
- Pin video of “focus student” in Zoom
 - Keep “focus student” in view while sharing screen.
 - Watch for clues – adapt pace and explanations

Other solutions - dummy student

- Choose a "dummy student" photo or mascot
 - Place close to video camera
 - Pretend "student" enthusiastically following your explanations
- Show your students this mascot
 - Ask for volunteer "focus student" to replace non-enthusiastic mascot

Other solutions – non-verbal students

- Sample the whole student group's understanding regularly.
 - Short answer polls
 - Yes / No voting
 - Ask for “thumbs up”

Other solutions – verbal students

- Ask for video on during student verbal communication
- Explain to the student group:
 - Importance of verbal communication skills within subject area
 - Power of learning by explaining to others
 - Chosen method for activating student verbal participation

Other solutions - group learning activities

- Video on in breakout rooms
- Jump between rooms to interact with students
- Clear instructions including required documentation e.g.
 - Saved whiteboard
 - Canvas discussion thread
 - Canvas assignment

Other solutions - social breaks

- Organise short regular "social breaks"
 - All video cameras on
 - Breakout rooms for social interaction
 - Stay in main room for informal questions
- Hope for the best:
 - Students might forget to turn their video off again
- Organise separate "offline breaks"
 - Give reminders to get moving

Pick and choose!

- Black box lecturing
- Focus student
- Dummy student
- Non-verbal students
- Verbal students
- Group learning activities
- Social breaks